The Day Cloud Met Zack All Over Again
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/55254268.

Rating:
Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Fandoms:
Compilation of Final Fantasy VII, Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII

Relationships:
Zack Fair & Cloud Strife, Cloud Strife & Tseng, Zack Fair & Tseng

Characters:
Cloud Strife, Zack Fair, Tseng (Compilation of FFVII), Genesis Rhapsodos, Angeal Hewley, Hollander (Compilation of FFVII), Cid Highwind, Aerith Gainsborough

Additional Tags:
Time Travel, Modeoheim Mission, Cloud Strife Is So Done, Zack Fair Needs a Hug, Poor Tseng (Compilation of FFVII), Ambiguous/Open Ending, Canon-Typical Violence, Character Death, Cloud Strife Has No Idea What Canon Is

Language:
English

Stats:
Published: 2024-04-16 Completed: 2024-04-18 Words: 12,159 Chapters: 2/2

The Day Cloud Met Zack All Over Again

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Summary

It was supposed to be a simple mission to Modeoheim.

It was not supposed to become the greatest headache of 27 year old Cloud's life.

Chapter 1

There was pain for a moment. A burning, stinging sensation all over his body. It was like his entire body was floating and tingling. That was then followed by the feeling of suddenly falling and landing harshly on something hard and metal. Then *that* was followed by another spike of stinging, burning pain. Cloud clenched his eyes shut against the flare of agony, controlling his breathing through the sudden shock of his head pounding and a thousand tiny needles shooting through his body.

The sound of alarms blaring forced him to open his eyes, and he felt like his stomach was trying to kill him for a minute. He shut them against the glaring red light as he tried to ground himself against the agony. The alarm was so loud.

Wait. Why was there an alarm?

Eyes snapping open, Cloud clocked several things at once.

One: he was in a Shinra Helicopter. Shinra being the key word here. Not a WRO model. An older Shinra model, if he had to guess. The technology wasn't quite up to par with the stuff Reeve and Cid had invented. Cloud would know. He helped with those schematics, and Shinra didn't even exist anymore to even create helicopters, so the fact that the old Shinra logo was everywhere was kinda weird. It was odd to wake up in an old Shinra Helicopter in such good conditions. Even if it did have an alarm blaring angrily at him.

The second thing he noted was that he was in an infantry uniform with a second infantry man by his side. Cloud… well, he could be forgiven for not knowing the guy's name. But Cloud also got the sense that he should know who this was. The poor guy seemed panicked, looking wildly about, clutching his weapon to his chest as if that would save him.

Man, Cloud forgot how heavy and itchy these infantry uniforms were. Not that he had a great memory of them to begin with. Sure, his memories were back, thanks to Tifa, but that didn't mean he remembered every single solitary detail. This was definitely something he didn't mind having forgotten. Helmet and all.

The third thing he noted was Zack.

Zack Fair.

Alive. Well. Breathing. Looking kinda panicked.

Panicked.

Cloud felt his breath catch in his throat, preventing anything from coming past his lips except a pained squeak at the sight of *Zack Fair* . Which was all well and good because the squeak sounded suspiciously like Zack's name, and Cloud wasn't sure he was supposed to know that just yet.

Zack, after all, wasn't looking at Cloud, but at the pilot seat.

The fourth thing Cloud noted, as he followed Zack's line of sight and the flashing red lights, was Tseng. Who was piloting the helicopter. The helicopter that was going to crash.

"Tseng!" Cloud shouted, lunging out of his seat as his instincts screamed at him to move and *do something* .

It took Cloud just a millisecond to realize that was a terrible idea. Tseng wasn't the man Cloud had slowly come to civil terms with anymore. This was a Turk, a young Turk who pulled all his hair back into one ponytail instead of only pulling back the parts that framed his face. A Tseng who looked so much younger, and was clearly nursing a headache right up until he answered Cloud's desperate call.

"Cloud!" Tseng answered back, his eyes knowing just who this was, even with the helmet covering Cloud's face. "The helicopter was sabotaged!"

Cloud remembered very little from this time period, but he was fairly certain Tseng wasn't supposed to know his name. Wait. Tseng would have known his name. The guy was a turk. But he definitely would not have used it. Cloud had a sort of title, after all, a way to make him inferior. He would have been *Cadet Strife,* or even just *Cadet* to Tseng.

Then again, Cloud wasn't supposed to know much about Tseng, but Cloud digressed. This entire situation was insane, and if anyone knew what was going on, it was Tseng.

Cloud hoped so, at least.

If Zack and this other infantry guy were smart, they'd fight through the panic and realize that something was odd about these two. He

hoped they weren't smart. No, that wasn't a nice thing to think. He at least hoped they jumped to different conclusions than time travel. There. That was a better thought process.

Cloud pushed those thoughts away as the helicopter continued its crash landing, getting dangerously close to the mountains.

"Anything important on board?" Cloud asked quickly, hoping that at least Tseng would remember where and when they were.

"Just Fair!"

"Great!" Cloud grabbed Tseng around his middle, yanking him out of the pilot seat. "Hold on tight!"

"What are you doing, Strife!?" the other infantry guy shouted.

"Abandoning ship!"

Cloud yanked off the disturbingly annoying helmet Cadets were forced to wear and tossed it aside. Probably not the smartest idea in a rapidly falling helicopter, but the thing would only hinder his next move. Readjusting his grip on Tseng, Cloud yanked open the hatch and looked back at Zack.

"Grab him and come on if you wanna live!" Cloud called to Zack, who was gaping at Cloud for… some… reason.

Cloud took only a moment to process that this Tseng was *his* Tseng when the man twisted to sit easily and properly in Cloud's arms to better cushion their descent and landing.

With Tseng secure, Cloud jumped.

There was a biting chill, the feeling of snow rushing past his skin. He curled around Tseng, twisting them so he would take the brunt of the fall. And as he expected, landing in the snow hurt, but not nearly as bad as being thrown against concrete by Sephiroth. Cloud quickly went through Vincent's training about grounding himself against the pain, forcing himself to adjust and relax against the giant bruise forming on his back.

Tseng, thankfully ever prepared, cast a cure on Cloud, easing the pain and bruising in seconds.

The helicopter crashed nearby seconds later.

Zack and the random infantry guy hit the snow a few feet from Cloud a second before the helicopter hit, so it took Cloud a moment to register that they even landed at all. Cloud didn't relax until he was sure Zack was okay.

"Ah! Man, that hurt!"

Tseng picked himself up, hand going to his head again as if in awe. Cloud couldn't blame him for the action. Tseng had once confessed that the fight with the remnants had given him permanent head-trauma. After Elena and Tseng nearly died on his orders, and Reno and Rude had tried to blow themselves up, Rufus wasn't keen to let his Turks leave his sight. It took forever for the Turks to heal, and all four came away with grievous injuries.

Having that head trauma gone was definitely bound to be a shock.

"Cloud," Tseng said, keeping his voice painfully low. "Your eyes. You're enhanced."

"I know. I can feel it, " Cloud mouthed back.

Zack had SOLDIER hearing, so trying to say anything would be difficult. Thankfully, Tseng could both speak at freakishly quiet octaves, and read lips.

"Zack will have questions."

"You got a cover?"

"You won't like it."

No. Cloud suspected he would absolutely hate whatever Tseng had just cooked up in that brain of his. It was probably even safe to bet that Cloud would want to strangle Tseng for whatever idea had popped into that devilish mind the Turks all seemed to carry.

"Can you stand?" Tseng inquired, giving Cloud that little smirk that meant Cloud was gonna do more than strangle Tseng. "Cadet Strife?"

"Bite me," Cloud mouthed and pushed himself onto his feet.

His body was definitely younger. Less pickled. He hoped. The mako practically flooded his body on that helicopter, something his much younger form was trying to adjust too. But it felt different. Lighter.

"How's your head?" Cloud decided to change the subject.

“Clearer than it’s been in years.”

A groan drew Cloud and Tseng’s attention as Zack shoved the terrified infantry man off him. “Well that’s a fine how-do-you-do.”

Pushing himself to his feet, Zack shook off the snow and looked to Cloud.

“Uh, Tseng? Who’s that? And why is he dressed like a trooper?”

“It’s a long story, Zack. And not one we have time for,” Tseng waved off in that way Turks did sometimes. He whipped out his phone and began to make a call before pausing. “No signal.”

“I coulda told you that,” Cloud quipped, getting a glare from Tseng. “Nibel native, remember? Place is dead, especially when it snows. We had one phone line to the whole town.”

“Well, at least we’re all in one piece,” Zack tried to ease. “We’ll be alright.”

“Thankfully, we have someone used to this kind of terrain,” Tseng hummed.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m a country boy,” Zack grumbled.

“Actually, I was talking about Cadet Strife.”

“Wait. Really? You’re a country boy, too? From where?”

Cloud cocked his head, studying Zack a moment. This was… vaguely familiar.

“Nibelheim.”

Right on cue, Zack burst out laughing.

“What about you?” Cloud put a bit of a challenge behind it this time.

“Me? Gongaga!”

Cloud snorted.

“Hey! What’s so funny about that? You know Gongaga?”

Yeah. Real well, actually. Kinda hate the Tonberries.

Cloud didn't say any of that, though. It wasn't the way the narrative was supposed to play out, and straying from that tale would only cause problems. Though he barely remembered the narrative last time, he had an idea of how it went.

"No, but it's such a backwater name."

"Ditto Nibelheim," Zack quipped right back, though there wasn't any bite to it.

"Like you've been there," Cloud huffed.

"I haven't. But there's a reactor there, right?" Zack said.

Right. That was a problem. He needed to fix that.

"A mako reactor outside Midgar usually means-"

"-Nothing else out there."

This was… This was how he met Zack. On this mission to some dumb mountain they were about to climb. This was the first time Cloud ever felt like he had a friend. It made his heart ache, knowing not all his memories came back.

It also made Cloud realize he had absolutely no idea what he was even on this mission for.

"Don't you worry, Tseng! Cloud and I are backwater experts! We'll get up that mountain in no time!"

Tseng gave Cloud a knowing look. "Alright then. We would have reached Modeoheim if we hadn't crashed. So, we're going to need to make up for lost time."

"Can you make it up the mountain?" Cloud asked, eyeing the Turk with great scrutiny. Tseng was always one of the harder ones to read.

"I'll be fine, Cloud."

"Then don't take too long," Cloud deadpanned.

"Aright, then!" Zack wisely chose to ignore the interaction. "Follow me, then!"

They quickly trekked up the mountain, doing their best to take care of the monsters on the way up. Cloud had forgotten about his gun until

he went to reach for a blade that wasn't there. He wasn't anywhere near as good a shot as Tseng, but Vincent and Barret had taught him a few things. Zack did most of the heavy lifting, though.

"Yo!" Zack turned mid stride, calling down the Mountain. "Don't fall too far behind."

Chancing a glance back, Cloud raised a brow at Tseng, getting a flat look in response. Of course Tseng had lied. The Mountain was dangerous as it was, but the trek wasn't doing Tseng any favors. Nor the other infantry guy.

"So. How do you, uh, know Tseng?"

Cloud liked to think he had enough control not to trip over himself at the question. He hadn't had the time to come up with any sort of alibi. The only clue Tseng had offered was that Cloud was going to hate it.

Wait.

"For now, let's just say I'm the bane of Rufus Shinra's existence."

"Say what now?" Zack questioned.

"The Turks are keeping it quiet," Cloud chose to say instead, waving off Zack's curiosity with a hand. "Guessing after today they'll probably say something to everyone else. But I'd rather keep my head, ya know?"

"Oh, so Turk business?"

"More like Vice President Business, but yeah. Pretty much."

Cloud was going to kill Tseng later, but he had a feeling he hit the plan dead on the nose. It was the most logical course of action that would both explain Cloud's strange mako enhancements and keep him safe from the likes of Hojo. The trick would be convincing Rufus to go along with it.

However, if Tseng remembered, Cloud couldn't help but wonder who else might be back. He hoped it wasn't just the two of them.

Right now, he needed to focus on the mission at hand.

"Hey, Zack, what exactly are we doing on this mission, anyways?"

"Huh!? You don't know!?"

“Uh, well, infantry men aren’t.. really told much,” Cloud quickly made up, though for some reason, that felt right. “We’re just…”

A flash of a memory. Familiar taunts. Harassment. People meant to be friends and partners looking down on him, judging him, shunning him. It was the ones who acted alone that got rejected, and Cloud was often rejected. Threats and taunts of being Science’s next pet. Threats and taunts of going on suicide missions.

Cloud winced against the memory, something that didn’t go unnoticed by Zack.

This was going to be a bit of a headrush, wasn’t it?

“Infantry men aren’t assigned on these missions unless they’re expected to die. And even if we come back alive, it’s not like we’re hailed as heroes. Our barrack members like to send us alone because they know we’ll be gotten rid of. Not like Heidegger cares. He’s aware he gets the SOLDIER rejects, so he doesn’t mind that his men tend to weed out the weaklings.”

“Dude, that’s messed up,” Zack hissed, eyes wide as his steps stuttered. “Right, well, you stick with me, Cloud! I’ll make sure you get back alive and that you get acknowledged as the SOLDIER you are! Cause we take care of our own!”

“Uh, okay. So, the mission-?”

“Oh! Right!” Zack said, slapping his fist into his palm. “So, from what I understand, we’re here to find Genesis’ secret base.”

“Genesis?” Cloud cocked his head. “Who’s that?”

“Don’t tell him you asked that,” Zack said. “He’d take offense.”

“Huh?”

“He was a former SOLDIER, right there alongside Sephiroth!” Zack exclaimed. “Then he went crazy and turned on Shinra!”

Cloud paused and stared at Zack in disbelief. “You have no idea what we’re walking into?”

“Some sort of secret base in Modeoheim filled with Genesis copies,” Zack said, clearly unsure of much else. “I don’t get told much otherwise.”

“Are… are you…” Cloud pursed his lips, biting back a groan. This. This right here. This was why Shinra crashed and burned in the future. “Give me a second.”

Turning on his heels, Cloud raced the few feet down the mountain to reach Tseng. To Zack’s surprise, and slight amusement, Cloud raced around Tseng and ducked under the man’s legs, grabbing his thighs and then racing back up the mountain with Tseng on his shoulders.

“Cloud Strife!” Tseng snapped, a clear threat in his words.

“Tseng of the Turks!” Cloud quipped right back. “Care to *actually* debrief us on what we’re walking into?”

Tseng sighed, tapping Cloud’s shoulder as a sign that he needed to be put down. Cloud dropped him so his legs were still wrapped around Cloud’s waist. Thankfully, Tseng admitted defeat.

“We’re traveling the mountain to reach Modeoheim. Genesis Rhapsodos is said to have a secret base there.”

“Right. And why are we after this guy?”

“Rhapsodos was a SOLDIER First who defected during the War in Wutai. He took a large portion of SOLDIER with him. And he somehow managed to alter their DNA to make them all look like him with just a touch of his finger.”

Cloud stopped walking.

“Tseng.”

“I knew that would pique your interest. First Classes Genesis Rhapsodos and Angeal Hewley were both experimented on in much the same way as Sephiroth was. The Doctor who experimented on them, Professor Hollander, claims to have used G-cells, but we believe they were named after Gillian Hewley. Who was also a doctor who worked alongside Professor Hollander. The G-cells are the same cells used on Sephiroth. J-cells.”

J-cells? JENOVA?

“Wait, Angeal’s mom was a doctor, too?” Zack asked in surprise.

“Yes, she retired to raise Angeal.”

“Back on track,” Cloud said quickly before this exploded into

something worse. “We’re almost there.”

“A few months ago, Genesis Rhapsodos went mad in Wutai. Hollander called the issue Degradation. But thinking back on what we saw of the files, it bears a striking resemblance to Geostigma. But rather than a rash from the outside, it begins from the inside.”

Cloud grit his teeth. “I don’t like where this is going, Tseng.”

“Wait… so if this degradation is a disease, then I guess the reason Sephiroth locked himself in the science archives was to find a cure, right? I mean, he really cares about Genesis and Angeal, and he just wants to help his friends, right?”

Cloud nearly tripped. “Sephiroth has *friends!?”*

“Uh, yeah, you’re looking at one of them!” Zack grinned, waving his arms to gesture at himself. “Though we’re more of a recent friendship!”

“There were others before even Rhapsodos and Hewley,” Tseng chose that moment to blow Cloud’s mind to the high heavens. “Though their files have long since gone missing. But yes, Cloud, Genesis Rhapsodos and Angeal Hewley are Sephiroth’s friends. He has been attempting to do everything he can to save them. In the end, it may just drive him mad.”

Cloud, for as much as he couldn’t believe it, got the picture. This Rhapsodos guy was one of the reasons Sephiroth gave into JENOVA.

Sure, Cloud had gone over some of the old files. There was no way to know for sure if there were anymore Remnants or not, so they had to do what they could to understand a potential threat. Cloud and his AVALANCHE had bonded with the Turks and Rufus over this matter, and they had learned a lot about Sephiroth.

None of this was ever in any of the files, though.

“Shinra being Shinra, they’ll have it covered up,” Tseng seemed to read Cloud’s mind. “In a few years, no one will even remember Rhapsodos or Hewley. There won’t be a paper trail left, let alone a digital or verbal one.”

Fine. Tseng could be forgiven. This time.

“Right,” Cloud adjusted his grip on Tseng so he could fire a few shots

at the creatures coming to attack them. “Fine. Just dandy.”

“An excellent shot,” Tseng commented.

“Nowhere near as good as Vincent’s, though,” Cloud scoffed, picking up the pace to match Zack as the SOLDIER charged. “Now don’t change the subject. Are we killing this Rhapsodos or are we bringing him in.”

“He’ll be killed regardless.”

“But…?”

“But Sephiroth wishes that both Rhapsodos and Hewley be brought back alive.”

“You think it will help?”

“We won’t know until we ask Aerith. If this is anything like Geostigma as I suspect, then she will be the only one who can help them.”

“Right. You’re placing a tall order, Tseng.”

“Just don’t let them touch you.”

Rolling his eyes, Cloud continued to scale the Mountain alongside Zack, allowing the other’s easy chatter to wash over him as Zack told him all about Angeal and Genesis. Tseng, reluctantly, remained piggy back style for the remainder of the hike, occasionally adding a comment or two here and there, but mostly watching Cloud’s back with his own weapon.

“Cloud! Look!”

Lowering Tseng to the ground, Cloud peered through the snow to see some sort of large factory looking structure, painted a bright red to be seen easily through the snow cover. A nearby ledge provided them the perfect overlook of the area, and Cloud quickly cataloged what they were up against.

“It’s Genesis,” Zack hissed as they clocked several people moving about the site.

“That’s a mako excavation test site,” Tseng informed the two as the second infantry guy slowly began to catch up.

“Alright! I’ll check it out!” Zack stood up.

“Our main mission was reconnaissance,” Tseng interjected. “Engaging Genesis was not expected.”

“Not ‘expected’? So just let them be?” Zack protested. “Unreal!”

“He’s right. Even if your mission was reconnaissance, the chances of Genesis not already knowing we’re here are slim, Tseng,” Cloud insisted, crossing his arms much the same way as Zack.

(Tseng had… never seen the similarity so obviously before. Cloud, the once shy infantry cadet now stood before him with grace and confidence. Grace and confidence that mirrored Zack Fair almost to a ‘T’. It was rather unnerving.)

“In any case, we’ll need more info. It’s possible that a larger force is hiding inside the building. Engaging could be risky if we don’t know what we’re walking into.”

And that was where the similarities ended. Zack, arms crossed, seemed to think it over, swaying back and forth in that way of his where he twisted his waist before dropping his arms as a thought came to him.

Cloud, however, tilted his head towards Tseng, brow raised in a silent question.

“A trap?”

A subtle nod from Tseng in return.

“Naturally.”

“How’s this then?” Zack proposed. “I go first, avoiding combat if possible, and sneak inside. Then I take a look around. If I can take ‘em, I will. If not, I’ll bolt.”

Tseng made a sound of contemplation and displeasure, though it was easy to mistake the sound as the latter. Cloud, however, was as skilled at understanding Turk as an outsider could be, and he was well aware Tseng was trying to process his old memories of these events. With Cloud being an unreliable narrator, it was probably a good idea for Tseng to carefully comb his memories. Zack took it as the latter, though.

“Come on, man!” Zack protested and begged all at one. “I’ll prove that SOLDIER isn’t just a bunch of mindless thugs.”

“I know you’re not, Zack,” Tseng said carefully. “This is bigger than just infiltration and information gathering. Genesis can turn you into one of his copies with just a touch. And there’s no telling what’s happening with Angeal. If you decide to go in, you go in with Cloud.”

Zack blinked, glancing to Cloud. Cloud just shrugged.

“The entrance is behind that warehouse. Make your way in from there,” Tseng advised the two.

“Gotcha!” Zack grinned.

“I’m sure you know, but it’ll be cold. Mind your body temperature. If you stop moving , your body temp will go down,” Tseng said. “To get it back up, just do your usual thing.”

Zack was puzzled for all but a second before grinning. “Oh that! Good idea!”

“Huh?” Cloud whispered.

He was answered, however, by Zack suddenly doing squats. “We just gotta do this, Cloud! We’ll be warm in no time, flat!”

“...Right.”

Tseng looked entirely amused as he handed Cloud a couple materia. With Tseng’s go ahead, Cloud and Zack took off down the cliff edge and raced over to the wall, standing on either side of the gate to be out of sight.

Getting in was easy. There were several bizarre bundles of boxes around that the two could duck behind. And oddly enough, squats when they had a chance were extremely helpful. And just as Tseng promised, there was an underground entrance to the testing site just behind the warehouse.

Zack gave Cloud a grin as they got close. It was infectious, just like Cloud remembered it being. He couldn’t help but grin back as they made to go inside the building. Rushing through the building was sort of easy too. Cloud even managed to pick up a sword from one of the guys.

The Genesis copies, however, really freaked Cloud out.

“So that was-?”

“Yep.”

“And Genesis did that?”

“Uh huh.”

“Stupid J-cells,” Cloud ripped his new sword from the chest of one such copy. “Stupid alien monsters and their shape shifting. Stupid idiots going alien trigger happy.”

It was Zack’s turn to be confused. “What?”

“I’m going to bludgeon Genesis to death. Just you watch me.”

“Uh… okay?”

Some fighting and an elevator ride later brought the two to their intended target.

“You need me, Genesis. Remember that,” some weird, fat guy was saying. He was at sword point, backing up slowly as someone who had to be actual-Genesis pressed the blade just inches from the man’s neck. “If you get rid of me, who’s going to stop the degradation?”

That was when the elevator finally brought them in full view of the events. Zack made to charge forward, but Cloud grabbed his arm, holding him back.

“The Jenova cells,” Genesis said.

Zack broke Cloud’s hold on him and charged forward, slamming his blade into Genesis’ with ease and allowing this other man time to move. For a fat guy wearing sandals, he was fast. Cloud was faster.

“Sit down,” Cloud quipped at the strange man, forcing him to sit on the ground with two painful hands clamping down on his shoulders as Genesis and Zack clashed blades.

“Cloud,” Zack praised as Cloud forced the strange man to his knees with a painful grip on the pressure point on his shoulder. “Good work!”

Genesis lashed out, knocking Zack’s blade away and moving to attack the strange man. Zack quickly jumped to the man’s defense.

“But…” the strange man hissed through the pain of Cloud’s grip, “nobody knows where the Jenova cells are being kept! Not even Hojo

knows! You'll never find it!"

Was this guy serious?

"Then I shall willingly accept my fate," Genesis said. "But, I'll take the world with me!"

"Woah! Time out," Cloud called as he raised his new found blade to block Genesis attack, still not letting go of the struggling strange man. "Why do you want Jenova cells?"

"They are the cure! The cure for my degradation!" Genesis seemed to praise. "A gift from the goddess herself to save me! And it has been hidden from my sight!"

Cloud blinked, still parrying Genesis blade with ease. He looked down to the strange man he guessed was Hollander. "What kind of nonsense have you been feeding him?"

"It's the truth!" Hollander ground out. "Hojo used them on his specimen! And they created his *perfect* little toy! If Genesis got them, he would- AAAAAAGGGGGGGGHHHHH!"

Cloud squeezed. Hard.

"Yeah. I'm not buying that crap," Cloud said, turning back to Genesis. "Show me the wound."

"What?" Genesis said in disbelief. "You want me to… show you the wound?"

"Well, you're obviously not going to get anywhere with *this* idiot because Hojo absolutely does know where Jenova is. So obviously you need a second opinion."

"Cloud, what are you-?"

"A second opinion, you say?" Genesis scoffed, cutting Zack off.

Cloud braced himself for a potential fight, but Genesis was as much of a wild card as Tseng had warned him he would be. In the next second, Genesis stepped away from Cloud, holding his blade to his right side, and holding his hand to his head.

"And does *this* warrant a second opinion?"

With a dramatic flourish of his hand, a giant black wing unfurled from

Genesis back. The former SOLDIER was clearly expecting some sort of reaction from Cloud. Here was this newby SOLDIER, sent on his first mission to kill a former First Class SOLIDER. It was the sort of thing that would have been common in Shinra.

Well, joke was on Genesis. Cloud wasn't a SOLIDER.

"Nice wing," Cloud commented, because it was a nice wing. Now that Cloud wasn't on the other end of a wing's ire, he could take time to appreciate its sheer beauty. "You take care of it?"

"And what does that matter to you?" Genesis sneered.

"Well, like most birds, when their feathers get all ruffled, they need to preen them, right? Does it get uncomfortable?"

"Again, what does it matter?"

"Maybe it doesn't matter," Cloud said, squeezing Hollander's shoulder all the tighter. "But you have a brand new appendage, you're in obvious pain, and I'm sure you're backed into a corner trying to find a cure, right? Let me see the wound."

"Fine."

It took a bit of maneuvering. Genesis had to shuck his bright red trench-coat, remove the typical layers of armor, and then work at his shirt.Thankfully the wing was retractable, and the action was made easier, but Cloud could already pinpoint the source of the pain.

The damage was already bad even before Genesis turned around.

Genesis' body was graying, like the skin itself was turning to ash and dust, rejected by the Lifestream from which he should have found comfort. To add, there was a disgusting, inky blackness creeping up Genesis' body, seemingly in his very veins, maybe even his nerves. His back was similar. Graying skin and inky blackness. But the major difference was the slash across his shoulder, about where the wing would have come from. It was a cut made from a very distinctive blade.

"Masamune," Cloud whispered with a spike of fear.

"So you know it? The blade of our dear Silver SOLDIER?"

"Who doesn't," Cloud challenged.

“Why are you here, little SOLDIER?”

“I’m not a SOLDIER.”

Genesis blinked. “I’m sorry, I appear to be missing something.”

“Let’s just say I was a personal pet project,” Cloud shrugged. “Never made it into SOLDIER, but that didn’t mean they didn’t have plans for me.”

“Cloudy here is real close to the Turks and Rufus Shinra,” Zack volunteered as if it would help.

“So you’re here to kill me.”

“No. My orders are to bring you in alive.”

Even if it was for a reason Cloud didn’t believe. Sephiroth? Have friends? Yeah. Right.

Then again. Genesis seemed like just the type of guy who would annoy his way into Sephiroth’s life. Given Sephiroth’s stoic nature, and usual lack of human emotion, Genesis seemed to be the perfect opposite. Cloud’s own friends had taught him that opposites truly did attract, even in friendships.

What was Angeal like?

“And why would Shinra want me back?”

“I wasn’t told. Though it was mentioned that Sephiroth had locked himself in science,” Cloud shrugged. “Wait. Hold on. If you were convinced Jenova cells were the cure, why didn’t you just ask Sephiroth for a blood transfusion?”

“Oh. I did. But the great *hero* had better things to do.”

Something wasn’t adding up. First of all, Sephiroth was crazy possessive. Even possessed by a creepy alien parasite, he was possessive. Tseng had implied this was a pre-crazy notion with how Sephiroth was locked away in the science archives. Which meant Sephiroth had locked himself away with the intent to find a cure, himself. So if Jenova cells were the known cure, then…

“Did you *personally* ask Sephiroth?” Cloud sighed, already knowing the answer.

“Of course not. Hollander did.”

Bingo.

Not even Zack missed the way Hollander had gone deathly pale and begun to tremble in Cloud’s grasp. Luckily, Genesis wasn’t as dumb as Cloud feared he was, and he charged forward, grabbing Hollander by the throat, and raising his blade in clear fury.

“You told me he *refused* .”

“Of-of course he-!”

“Sounds to me like you just didn’t want to owe *Hojo’s pet* any favors.”

“DID HE VOLUNTEER OR NOT!?”

“He-he was… grk… the-the first… to… volun… urk… teer!”

Cloud was kinda disappointed Genesis didn’t just bash the man’s skull in. But punching him unconscious was fine, too. For now. Personally, Cloud thought getting rid of the scientists before they caused mass genocide was a better idea, but that really wasn’t his problem right now.

Even if he did have a sickening feeling that it would become his problem later.

Naturally, as was the way of things in Cloud’s life, the man turned to Cloud next.

“I don’t expect you to just come with me,” Cloud said before Genesis could get a word in, and then he raised his hand to make sure Zack didn’t say anything. “Like, let’s be honest. Shinra sucks. We both know that. You going back right now would be the worst case scenario.”

“CLOUD!”

“What are they going to do to him there, Zack?” Cloud turned to the other man. “He’s degrading. To Shinra, his usefulness is worn out. Shinra has no use for broken toys. Tseng was sent here with orders to kill on site if he got the chance.”

“Then what do you suggest we do?! We can’t just let Genesis suffer like this!”

“You’re right. No one deserves this,” Cloud agreed. “But right now, the

only cure is unobtainable. Jenova cells might help temporarily, but your current genetic make-up is too unstable for that to be a permanent fix."

Cloud directed the last part to Genesis, who was watching the exchange in bemusement and clear curiosity.

"Then what do we do?!"

"You need to be somewhere safe. Somewhere no one else will think to look," Cloud mused, trying to think of somewhere he could send Genesis.

Was Corel still around? It might be, but Cloud wasn't sure Barrett or Dyne would appreciate the visitor. Nibelheim was out because he had no idea where Jenova was and there were those terrible lab reports in the mansion. He also didn't want to risk his mom. Or Tifa. Or Vincent. Even if Vincent could handle himself against a super soldier. Rocket Town, maybe, but Cid could be prickly, and the rocket launch would be a problem. His younger self didn't make friends, so he definitely didn't have his connections he gained in the future. Wutai was just asking for trouble. Which meant only one place came to mind.

Both Zack and Tseng might kill.

"There's a church in the slums of Sector 5," Cloud said.

"What!? Cloud-!"

"Talk to the flower girl. She'll help you. There will be the occasional Turk visitor, but that's under Tseng's jurisdiction, and since Tseng gave *me* the order to keep you alive, the only person we have to worry about him killing is me."

"What?"

"What?"

"Oh, yeah," Cloud chuckled, much to the growing confusion of the two SOLDIERs. "Tseng is *definitely* going to kill me. The Flower Girl is their best kept secret, after all."

"What? Aerith is their best kept secret?"

"And why is this flower girl so important?"

Cloud shrugged. "Can't say. That's her secret to tell."

Before Zack could protest, Genesis suddenly burst into laughter.

“Infinite in mystery is the gift of the goddess . I expected my killer, and you came to me like a savior.”

“Well if Gaia has anything to say about it, then you’re probably right on both counts,” Cloud grumbled bitterly. “Now go find the flower girl. Go on! Shoo! I have other problems to deal with than you!”

“Oh? Am I not special?”

“I came here in person, didn’t I?” Cloud rolled his eyes at the theatrics. “You were actually the easier thing on my list of to-dos. But I would very much like to get back to finding ways to kill Tseng and becoming the bane of Rufus Shinra’s existence.”

Genesis could tell Cloud wasn’t going to elaborate, so he turned to Zack. However, his best friend’s apprentice was less than helpful.

“I met the guy an hour ago, and he was disguised as a regular infantry grunt. I’m just as lost as you are.”

“Infinite in mystery indeed,” Genesis hummed. “Alright, dearest gift of the goddess, I shall seek sanctuary with your flower girl. If there truly is a cure, I expect it to be found.”

“Done,” Cloud agreed easily enough.

“Then… I shall take my leave…”

Yeah, definitely the opposite of Sephiroth. Genesis practically glided across the room with a dramatic flare. It was different from the graceful glide Cloud was used to from Sephiroth. Sephiroth moved with purpose. Genesis moved with flair. A dancer vs a theatre kid, maybe.

The wing on his back unfurled, and Genesis perched precariously on the edge of the railing, standing above a deadly drop.

“Even if the morrow is barren of promise, nothing shall forestall my return.”

And then he tilted backwards.

“GENESIS!” Zack cried in fear as he rushed after Genesis, thankfully *not* diving over the edge.

“He’ll be fine, Zack,” Cloud moved to stand beside the man. “That wing isn’t just for show.”

“I know that! But Genesis isn’t alright! And you sent him to Aerith! How do you even know Aerith?!”

“I don’t.”

A lie and a truth all in one. This Aerith wasn’t his Aerith. Even if Cloud had gotten to know her once, she wasn’t the same person from before. She hadn’t been shaped by the same experiences just yet.

“What?”

“I told you, I work with the Turks, and the Turks know Aerith. I know about her from them, and at the moment, she’s the safest place Genesis and Angeal can seek sanctuary from without sparking Shinra’s notice. At least until we can get them help.”

“But the Turks know where she is.”

“Yep. And that is exactly why Aerith is the safest person they can trust.”

Zack clearly didn’t like this, but he didn’t argue further. Cloud felt kind of bad for keeping Zack in the dark, but it really wasn’t his secret, or his right, to tell Aerith’s secret. He hoped Zack would forgive him later, but right now, they had a job to do.

Throwing Hollander over his shoulder, Cloud let Zack lead the way out of the factory.

Chapter 2

Tseng wasn't there waiting.

This mere fact set off several alarm bells in Cloud's head, and he scanned the cliff for any sign of what could have happened to Tseng and the trooper he really needed to learn the name of. From this angle, there was little he could make out.

"Huh? What's that over there?" Zack pointed as Cloud glared at the cliff where Tseng should have been waiting. "Looks like a tunnel or something."

Sure enough, where there had been a wall of ice, there now lay a tunnel. Exchanging a look, Cloud and Zack raced inside, fighting their way through the monsters as they found themselves in the abandoned city of Modeoheim.

This is near Icicle Inn. Is that where Tseng went?

No. Tseng wouldn't have gone there, especially not alone. Even with an added infantry grunt, there was no way Tseng would have gone there. So where was he?

The town of Modeoheim was abandoned years ago, long before Cloud came to Shinra as a youth looking to make a name for himself. He didn't remember why it had been abandoned, only that it was considered unsafe, even for the standards of Shinra covering up an accident by moving in name doubles.

Which was saying something.

"Wait. What?"

Cloud glanced at Zack to see the guy staring at his phone with a pinched expression.

"Care to share with the class?"

"Uh, yeah. Um. Lazard just resigned."

Lazard? Who was that? Was this something else Cloud had forgotten due to his messed up psyche?

"Who?" he vocalized.

“Oh, right, Lazard’s not that famous,” Zack muttered. “He’s the head of SOLDIER. Basically the guy in charge. Kind of weird since he’s not enhanced, himself, and he doesn’t have any tactical experience, but Shinra put him in charge. He’s a great guy! But… why is he suddenly resigning?”

Where was Tseng when you needed him?

Cloud found himself lost in thought as Zack searched around the bar/ theater/ bathhouse they stumbled upon. It was clear he was missing a little too much information for this mission.

This Lazard person was in charge of Soldier, potentially because he had some sort of connection to Soldier, if Cloud had to guess. Now, out of nowhere, he was retiring. All of which was lining up with the fact that Genesis and Angeal were suddenly going crazy. Given the mission briefing Cloud had tucked in his pocket, this Lazard was the one who requested infantry grunts go on this mission with Zack, rather than other SOLDIERs.

This whole thing was a mess. Cloud smelled a conspiracy.

So why hadn’t the Turks?

“A bathhouse?” Zack whispered as they approached the Modeoheim Bathhouse at the back of the place. “And the water is still running.”

That was kind of weird, especially since they just found the wheel to the boiler room outside in the hallway.

Wings flapping caused the two to jolt, spinning around at him with blades at the ready. The giant Griffon clearly wasn’t what Zack was hoping to find, but it thankfully didn’t hinder his movement as they both lunged for the creature.

Cloud just… hadn’t been expecting the thing to have a face.

Well, a human face.

“Angeal monsters,” Zack whispered.

“Wait. *That’s* Angeal?”

“Well, his face, yeah,” Zack nodded as he looked around the room. “Wait! Does that mean he’s here?”

Cloud glanced warily at Zack, and adjusted his grip on Hollander.

“The water is way too hot. Maybe we could find a clue if we made it less hot?”

Listen, Cloud was grasping at straws and needed a way to distract Zack.

“Yeah! Great idea, Cloud! Maybe up there!”

Zack led the charge up a set of broken down stairs, Cloud following at a far slower pace as he tried to continue thinking through things. He wasn’t a Turk. This wasn’t his area of expertise, and man he really missed Vincent. A lot.

“HEY!”

The startled cry from Zack, had Cloud snapping back to attention and jumping the last couple steps. Zack was crouched over the second infantry guy, who was groaning in clear pain. Right. That had probably been Cloud in another life. Kinda messed up to think about.

But just a short distance away was Tseng, and Cloud bolted to the Turk’s side.

“Tseng,” Cloud breathed, clasping the man by the shoulder as he dropped Hollander’s unconscious form like a ragdoll.

“Cloud,” Tseng hissed through the pain. “You.. you caught Hollander…”

“Was there ever any doubt,” Cloud was shuffling through the materia he stole off the bodies of Genesis copies. He quickly slipped the cure onto his bracer. “Here.”

Tseng groaned as the healing magic washed over him. “You shouldn’t waste your magic.”

“Bite me, Tseng. We’re in this boat together. Now come on.”

“Wait- WAIT!” Tseng gasped as Cloud lifted Tseng into a fireman's carry. “You- you can’t fight this way.”

“Then it’s a good thing Zack is here,” Cloud quipped back, grabbing Hollander’s dead weight by the collar of his shirt. Zack, seemingly sure the infantry guy was alright, rushed to Cloud’s side.“Let me guess, we’ve got company?”

“Angeal… is waiting,” Tseng forced out, looking to Zack for that first

part. “Cloud… you need to leave me… here.”

“Not happening. Let’s go Zack.”

“Right,” Zack grinned, leading the way down through the door.

Cloud heard Tseng sigh, patting him on the hip in permission to go forward. Cloud had a feeling there were things he needed to know about what was to transpire, but Cloud also knew talking about it was risky. However…

“Why would Angeal be waiting for Zack?” he asked the Turk.

“Zack was his pupil. Chosen personally and specifically by Lazard and Angeal so Angeal could test himself and pass on his teachings. Zack blossomed beautifully under Angeal’s tutelage. He is the SOLDIER that stands before us because of Angeal’s training.”

“But…”

“But Angeal went mad, much like Genesis. With Genesis insane, and both Hollander and Lazard whispering treason in his ear, I can only imagine what must be going through Angeal’s head. Cloud. This will be difficult. Especially for Zack.”

For Zack, huh? Tseng was putting an awful lot of emphasis on the connection for some reason. There was definitely something Cloud needed to know about this situation that no one was telling him. Yet. Maybe he should have let Zack go ahead so he could get the information out of Tseng.

Why was this relationship so important?

Cloud hated flying in blind, but more often than not, that was his lot in life.

Except…

That was the Buster Sword.

The strange man with the white angelic wing was holding the Buster Sword.

The strange man with the white angelic wing wasn’t looking at them as he held the Buster Sword, but he turned to acknowledge Zack as his pupil approached.

Oh.

Cloud did not like where this was going.

“It should have been me…” Angeal said, a deep self-loathing practically oozing from his tone. “I should have dealt with Genesis.”

And it was clear Zack was just a tad bit bitter about recent events. “Yeah, then why did you send me?”

Wrong thing to say. Cloud may suck at words, but even he could tell that was the wrong thing to say. If they wanted to talk Angeal down from this idiotic suicide game, Angeal needed to get his head on straight.

Angeal spun around, raising his blade. “To prepare you. For your next fight.”

Zack staggered back, all bitterness clearly gone. “Have you lost it!?”

Angeal didn’t deem that worthy of an answer. His blade cut through the air, Zack expertly dodging each and every blow.

“Stop it!” he begged.

“Someone’s waiting for you, no?” Angeal taunted.

…

Aerith.

Cloud lowered Tseng to the floor, ready to springboard into action had he not needed to keep an eye on Hollander. Still, if this went south, Cloud would gladly kill the doc and stop Angeal in one strike if need be.

“Angeal,” Zack said, still begging his mentor to stop. “Don’t do this!”

Angeal still refused to listen. Buster Sword clashing with Zack’s own blade, throwing the two into a deadly battle of wills. Zack, who wished nothing more than to save his mentor. Angeal, who wanted nothing more than an honorable death.

Zack seemed to be doing well for himself, dodging every blow as it came. Well, almost every blow. Zack clearly didn’t want to go on the physical for this fight, and Angeal took advantage of that by nicking Zack on the chin.

In a spot that made Cloud's eyes widen.

Oh… Zack had to carry the reminder all his life, didn't he?

Cloud decided to make the best of a stupid situation and proceeded to throw what he had on hand directly at Angeal. However, as Cloud had very little on hand due to the fact he was, well, "woken up" as an infantry grunt, he was limited in the way of personal belongings to throw.

Sure, there was the sword he stole, but it was kinda stupid to throw that, especially when he needed it. Then there was the materia, but he could just hear Yuffie screaming at him. The gun he had already handed to Tseng, trusting the Turk to use it despite its flaws.

So obviously the best thing to throw was Hollander.

Not like he was really important, after all.

On the plus side, Cloud now knew that he still had enough strength to throw a grown man. That was nice to know. No. Really. He hadn't been able to gauge his own strength since he "woke up". So knowing he could throw a grown man was really helpful for what he was about to do next.

Hollander, who had been trying to feign unconsciousness since around the time they found Tseng, let out a startled scream as he was sent flying through the air. Angeal barely had time to gasp before he shoved his pupil out of the way and took the full force of Hollander's weight being thrown at him like a torpedo.

"Huh," Cloud stepped into the room, letting the borrowed blade rest against his shoulder. "Well that was fun."

"What…?" Angeal gasped, shoving Hollander off of him to look at Cloud. His eyes blew wide as he took in the sight of Cloud, dressed as an infantry grunt, and sporting vibrant mako eyes. "Who-?"

"Destroy him, Angeal! Take vengeance for our family's suffering!" Hollander ordered, scurrying to hide behind Angeal. "Take revenge for Genesis' demise!"

"Family?!" Zack gaped.

"NO! My father is dead!" Angeal roared as he spun to face Hollander, wing stretching out as if to protect Zack.

Interesting.

What was less interesting was the absolute nonsense Hollander was spewing.

“Do you ever speak the truth?” Cloud deadpanned at the scientist as he moved to stand beside Zack, watching as Hollander coward behind Angeal. “Go take care of Tseng. I’ll take care of this.”

“But Cloud-!”

“Zack,” Cloud kept his voice low so only Zack and Angeal could hear them, “he wants you to kill him.”

Angeal flinched, and Cloud would bet gil that he was feeling some sort of regret, too. Cloud didn’t dare look at Zack, but he knew the other was radiating a deep and painful betrayal. This would both break and make the Zack Cloud would come to know in the future. The Zack he was once best friends with.

Reaching out his hand, Cloud clasped Zack’s wrist and gave it a squeeze, meeting the other’s eyes. He gave Zack his best, friendly smile. A smile he normally reserved for Denzel and Marlene. An assurance that said he would take care of their worries and fears and protect them from a crueler fate.

Zack took a couple steps back, and then rushed to kneel by Tseng, who immediately began to speak to Zack in rapid succession.

“Fine,” Hollander brushed himself off, unable to hide the hiss of pain as he gripped his shoulder. “Then do it for your mother.”

“My mother’s shame made her take her own life!”

The painful gasp that escaped Zack was clearly the breaking of a tension point in this relationship. Tseng really needed to catch Cloud up sooner rather than later. Like, seriously. This was ridiculous. Why was there so much drama happening?

“Shame?” Hollander hummed, like he was disappointed. “How terribly misguided! She should have been proud. Proud that she was the namesake of our experiment. Project G, or should I say, “Project Gillian.”

Angeal lunged forward, grabbing Hollander by the collar of his shirt.

“Don’t say her name!”

“You… you pumped her full of J-cells, didn’t you?” Cloud nodded as he recalled what Tseng had said.

“Gillian. The woman implanted with Jenova cells,” Hollander rattled off, clearly smug about his own work. “Genesis, who had her genes mapped onto him during the fetal stage. Yes, Genesis was a failure, I’ll admit it. But you, Angeal…”

“You messed up his psyche so bad now he’s suicidal,” Cloud cut off Hollander’s rant.

“You were actually bred inside Gillian’s body. You are perfection!”

“Ew,” Cloud gagged.

“Zack,” Angeal shoved Hollander away and turned towards his pupil. Thankfully, Tseng was keeping a steady hand on Zack to keep him from doing anything stupid. “I am perfect. A perfect… monster. My cells can absorb genetic traits, and pass them along to others.”

“A two-way conduit,” Hollander laughed in glee as he once more picked himself up off the ground. “Jenova’s power has passed on to you completely.”

Angeal glared at Hollander, a sentiment Cloud shared.

“Zack, do you remember what I said?” Angeal once more called to his pupil. “About our enemy being all that creates suffering?”

Zack swallowed. “Yeah. But you’re not one of them.”

“But I created my own suffering,” Angeal lamented. “Zack. Let me show you.”

“No.”

In quick succession, Cloud kicked out Angeal’s knee, causing the man to cry out in shock, especially as Cloud drove the borrowed blade into his calf, pinning him to the ground. Cloud then moved with a dangerous speed, tucking his arms under Angeal’s arm pits, then over his shoulders to lace and clamp down over Angeal’s neck.

“Tseng! Now!”

Tseng, thankfully, was ahead of the game, and the gun fired before

Zack could panic properly and push it away from its intended target.

“NO! ANGEAL!”

But Tseng was far too good a shot. Three bullets made it to their intended target before Zack yanked the gun from his hands. Those three bullets hit their mark dead on. One in the heart. One in the head. And one in the mouth, just for good measure.

Hollander’s body hit the ground with a wet thud.

“That,” Cloud hissed to Angeal, “is what you do to a monster.”

Angeal seemed to wilt in Cloud’s hold, ready to accept his fate at the hands of this unknown SOLDIER.

“Then end me,” he breathed. “End me and be rid of the monster before it becomes worse.”

“What monster,” Cloud sighed and released Angeal from the hold. “All I see is a man who lost his way.”

“Then you’re blind,” Angeal hissed. “I am a monster! I can show you!”

“Cloud! The copies!”

Yeah, Cloud kinda expected those. Even before Angeal began to summon them. He quickly charged forward, picked up the Buster and cut his way through the first monster who made a lunge at Angeal. It was like being reunited with an old friend as he cleaved through monster after monster. The weight of the Buster was familiar, and he was still able to swing it around with expert ease. It was nice.

When the last monster was felled, he turned to face Angeal once more.

“You done being an idiot?” Cloud inquired with an annoyed tilt of his head and an agitated click of his teeth. “Because I’ve got news for you; there’s a cure. And Genesis is on his way to find the woman who will help us find that cure.”

It was Tseng’s turn to choke. “CLOUD STRIFE! WHAT DID YOU DO?”

“Why, the mysteries truly are infinite,” a voice cooed as something dropped directly behind Angeal and yanked the blade out of his leg. “How curious that Tseng seems to actually want to kill you.”

“Genesis?” Angeal choked out. “I… I thought…”

“I am quite well, all things considered,” Genesis dragged Angeal to his feet. “Will you not listen to our gift of the goddess, my friend? There is a cure. A cure that lies within the hands of a flower girl. The very flower girl your young apprentice has taken a liking to, it would seem.”

“What?”

“Didn’t I already send you to the flower girl,” Cloud grumbled, pushing back his spiky hair like he was trying to stave off a headache.

“Of course, but I refuse to leave my friend behind,” Genesis hummed, carefully moving to help support Angeal’s weight. “Tell me, dear gift of the goddess. Will your flower girl be accepting of us both?”

“Don’t step on her flowers or tick her off and you’ll be fine,” Cloud snorted, a fond smile growing on his face. “And she’s not *my* flower girl.”

Genesis’ smile was wide and far too amused, like Cloud was some sort of game he needed to figure out and beat.

Ick.

“I’m sure both Zack and Tseng will be by to check on you both when they come to check on Aerith,” Cloud hummed, glancing to the two in question.

Tseng was schooling his expression, but Cloud knew well enough that Tseng and Vincent had similar mannerisms. Which meant the guy was *really* going to kill Cloud later. Tseng cared for Aerith dearly, even if he never could show it. And now Cloud had just sent two dangerous fugitives to her care like it was normal. Which… to be fair, it kind of was. But it would be alright, he was sure. Aerith was a brave and strong-willed woman. Plus Tseng could just double security.

Then there was Zack, who seemed to be contemplating the thought of being able to see both Aerith *and* Angeal at the same time. The sting of betrayal was still there, but the thought of being able to talk to Angeal again seemed to ease something in Zack.

Good. Zack didn’t deserve that pain.

“And if I don’t want to be saved?”

“Then you’re a fool,” Cloud quipped back easily while Zack squawked

in indignation. And *Ho-boy* , Angeal was not going to make this easy, was he. “You’re degrading. But not nearly rapidly enough to actually kill you. Though it seems you figured that part out on your own. Currently, your cells are so unstable that your body no longer remembers its original composition. You need help, Angeal. And soon. Preferably before you lose yourself.”

“Please, Angeal,” Zack begged. “Please just listen to Cloud.”

“I can’t, Zack. I’m a monster, I’ll-!”

“You said you caused your own suffering, right?” Cloud cut off, suddenly standing extremely close to Angeal and Genesis, causing the latter to jump and the former to flinch. Not that Cloud let Angeal go far. “You’re a monster because you caused your own suffering?”

“My own and so many others.”

“Then do something about it,” Cloud hissed, as he recalled something Zack had said about Angeal. “Dying isn’t going to help you atone for your sins. You claim to have been a man of honor? Then prove it. Stop trying to take the coward’s way out. Don’t throw your life away like it was worthless, Angeal. Be a man of honor and atone for the suffering you caused.”

Angeal swallowed thickly, unable to come up with any sort of argument. A quick glance at Genesis showed the man was once more entirely too amused by this turn of events, though he seemed grateful too.

“Atoning… is that… truly what a man of honor would do?”

Angeal looked up at Cloud, searching the younger for some sort of answer. Cloud met that desperate pleading stare with the fire blazing in his heart. Cloud would never call himself a man of honor. Not ever. But learning to atone, learning to forgive one’s self, that was the most honorable thing he could think of. It was the right thing to do. He was certain of that much.

Angeal seemed to find that answer in Cloud’s eyes, dropping his head in a firm nod.

“Then I shall atone,” he swore. “I will seek out this cure and seek forgiveness.”

Cloud nodded back, not that Angeal could see that. At least the guy

wasn't going to try and keep dying. That was yet another thing he didn't need to keep worrying about, at least.

And then Zack's knees buckled, causing everyone to startle. He was on all fours, the weight of what was happening was finally given a chance to come out as the tears flowed freely, and he desperately gasped for air. Cloud was by his side in seconds, tugging Zack to his chest, and allowing the older to hold onto him like he was a lifeline.

"Zack," Angeal breathed, the name coming out as a keen.

A similar, more guttural sounding keen punched its way past Zack's lips. Angeal attempted to stumble towards his student. However, the ordeal, and his previously impaled leg, didn't help in his movements, and he found himself crawling to Zack, aided by a fretting Genesis.

Angeal gathered his student into his arms, whispering frantic apologies, while Zack let himself grieve what nearly came to pass. Both Cloud and Genesis hovered over the two, trying and failing not to be too overbearing. The two clearly needed this moment, and they really didn't need to interfere.

A distraction came in the form of Tseng waving for their attention.

"The air shifted," Tseng informed them. "Something is approaching, and I didn't call for back up."

"Hey, Zack fiddled with the phone downstairs, not me," Cloud raised his hands in surrender. "I didn't call anyone."

Not that he knew who he even could call.

"Angeal dragged me up here before I could use the phone," Tseng admitted, looking pointedly to Cloud. "So unless something happened, it isn't something on my end."

"And I certainly didn't call for aid," Genesis frowned into the distance. "My copies are tied to me, but I released them from their orders upon word of this miracle cure. They're to wait in hiding until I find it."

Cloud could hear it, now. The sound of something approaching them. An engine of some sort, different from that of the usual Turk preferred Helicopter. So Cloud doubted it was Reno or Rude. It was definitely an airship, though. Zack tried to squint through the snow covered mountains, trying to spot the oncoming ship.

It sounded familiar. But why would it sound familiar?

Wait.

Zack and Angeal joined them in time for Cloud's eyes to go wide as he let out an audible gasp. All eyes were on him as the relieved, ecstatic grin spread on his face.

"It's the Tiny Bronco," Cloud breathed in awe as the ship finally came into view.

"The Tiny what?" Zack questioned, voice hoarse and scratchy like Vincent's.

"The Tiny Bronco. Property of the pilot and engineer, Cid Highwind. Head of the Shinra Space Program Expedition. At least, to those in Rocket Town he's in charge given Palmer most definitely isn't," Tseng rattled off for the benefit of the three SOLDIERs.

"And why would a man like that come here?" Genesis inquired.

"Probably to make sure I haven't killed Cloud yet," Tseng deadpanned.

In Turk world, the look Tseng was sending Cloud could only be described as a promise of a cruel and painful death. Cloud returned his smile with an impish grin. This was becoming a much larger mess than either could have anticipated.

"The mystery deepens, still," Genesis mused with great mirth. "I suppose this is where Angeal and I shall take our leave. Whether a friend of our Gift of the goddess or not, we shall remain hidden."

Zack was reluctant to let Angeal go, hands lingering in the clasp of Angeal's arm, even as the other man promised to see Zack again.

"I have to go, Zack. I have to atone for what I've done."

"I know, but… just promise I'll see you alive then next time I see you, yeah?"

"I promise. I'll be alive when you see me," Angeal agreed, pressing his forehead to Zack's. "And you need to be alive, too. You hear me? Something tells me things at Shinra are going to get… strange."

Cloud gave a fond huff of laughter, drawing the attention of the four. "Trouble does have a tendency to find me. Hey. If the two of you get

bored of just waiting for a cure, you should know that Scarlett and Science have a bad habit of unleashing their failed creations on the slums of Midgar. Mercenary work is pretty promising down there."

"Speaking from experience?" Angeal questioned.

"You could say that," Cloud grinned, giving the two a two fingered salute. "Now get out of here. Both of you."

"Relax, my gift of the goddess," Genesis laughed fondly, like they were sharing some sort of inside joke. "We'll be on our way before your Tiny Bronco lands. Come Angeal, tell your puppy goodbye, already."

Zack and Angeal had pulled back, and Angeal was now holding the handle of the Buster Sword towards Zack, who was shaking his head profusely.

"This was always a symbol of my honor, Zack," Angeal said. "An honor I no longer bear. I want you to hold onto this, to use it well, until I earn it back. Please, Zack."

"I-"

Zack stopped his own protest, hand going out to grasp the handle and pull the Buster Sword to his chest, gripping the handle in a vice. With Genesis helping to support Angeal's weight, the two unfurled their wings and prepared to take off.

"Oh. Wait," Cloud stepped forward, raising the cure in his hands to cast over the two SOLDIERs.

"Ah, I'm afraid-"

The spell washed over Angeal first. Then Genesis. Cloud figured, since he had slammed his blade through Angeal's leg, healing the two up before they went to Midgar was the least he could do. He watched, satisfied, as Angeal's leg healed, and Genesis lost some of the tension in his wing shoulder. Good. Whatever injury Genesis had gained was probably recent, right? So it was sure to have healed up nicely.

"Now go on," Cloud waved them off, ignoring Genesis and Angeal's gaping stares. "Get out of here. Before someone else shows up besides one of my friends."

Angeal snapped out of his gaping first, pushing off the ground and

yanking Genesis into the air with him, forcing the other to fly or be dropped painfully to the ground. Genesis took a moment longer to stare at Cloud in disbelief before following after Angeal in search of Aerith.

“Did you just heal Genesis’ shoulder?” Zack gaped at Cloud much the same way the other two had.

“Uh, yeah? I could tell it was bothering him when we arrived.”

“Cloud,” Tseng said slowly, as though speaking to a troubled child who didn’t understand what they did wrong. “Genesis Rhapsodos’ shoulder sustained that injury over a year ago. It never healed and triggered the beginning of his Degradation.”

Over… a year ago?

Huh? That was new. Sure, Materia could heal almost any injury, but if Degradation was anything like Geostigma, then that meant it shouldn’t have done much. Come to think of it, Angeal’s leg was oozing that nasty black stuff, too.

Cloud had a feeling he had just done something incredibly stupid if Tseng’s look was anything to go by.

Shaking himself of the complications *that* brought, Cloud patted Zack on the shoulder before throwing Tseng over his shoulder and racing back the way they had come. Zack’s heavy footsteps could be heard pounding behind Cloud as they raced back through the Spa and Theatre room, and reappeared back in the snowy tundra of Modeoheim.

He paused, once, however. The infantry man who had come along with them was sat up against the door where Tseng had originally been, and his injuries were clearly grave from being thrown about. Cloud knelt beside him and cast a quick cura on the guy.

“Heh, what do you know? Everyone said we would die on this mission,” the guy chuckled, letting out a groan of relief as the spell took over. “This why you preferred to keep the helmet on?”

The guy tapped at Cloud’s cheek, just under his eye.

“It’s complicated,” Cloud confessed. “Can you stand?”

“Maybe…”

Which was a solid no. That wasn't good. Cloud couldn't just leave the guy behind, either. It wasn't fair that he could somehow save a couple defected Firsts but not the one guy who was actually meant to die on this mission.

"I got him, Cloud!" Zack quickly volunteered, listing the infantry man up much the same way Cloud remembered Zack carrying him all those years ago. "You got a name, trooper?"

"Uh… Reed, sir. Parker Reed."

"Well Parker, let's get us out of here! Cloud's apparently got some friend coming to save our butts!"

Parker Reed. Cloud… still didn't remember him. He felt kinda bad about it. Guy was given the short end of the stick, just like Cloud. But Parker Reed survived. He defied the odds stacked against him, and the circumstances meant to kill him.

He'd try to check on the guy later. For now, he had an airship to catch.

Cloud's heart was pounding as he watched the Tiny Bronco land.

Either Cid remembered, too, or someone had sent Cid knowing Cloud would react far friendlier if he saw the man. And yet, there was a painful ache in Cloud's chest at the thought that Cid might not remember him. The mere thought was enough to make Cloud dizzy, and he found himself tripping over his own feet as he stumbled to a stop, allowing Tseng to drop back to the ground.

It felt like forever till the Tiny Bronco landed, and Cloud felt his heart beating frantically in his chest, counting down to the moment of truth with each frantic thump. When Cid's face appeared, it was like time stopped. The two locked in a stare down, searching the other for something, anything, familiar.

Cid cracked first.

"Hey! Cloud! Tseng hasn't killed you yet?"

A startled laugh punched past Cloud's lips at the easy, familiar smile that greeted him. This was *definitely* his Cid. A Cid who was more sure of himself, not as angry at Shinra and Shera, like he used to be. This Cid was cheeky, filled with a brightness that came shortly after their battle on Advent Day and the fight against Deepground.

“What are you doing out here, Cid?” Cloud called back, unable to stop his own growing grin.

“Well, wouldn’t you know it, there I was, wooing the love of my life again, working on my baby as fast as I can, and then I get this call from our mutual friend, saying you went on some dangerous mission in Modeoheim, and I needed to come do an immediate pick up.”

Process of elimination. Barret would be in Corel. Tifa and Vincent in Nibelheim. Nanaki would either be in Cosmo Canyon, or in Shinra. There was no way Cid would refer to Rufus or the Turks as “friends”. Which meant the only person who had access to the Infantry database and could track down Cloud was their dear director.

“Reeve called you?” Cloud asked.

“Course he did! Was all freaked out about it, too! Took way too long to get the idiot to calm down!”

“Wait. You know the Turks and Director Tuesti but not Lazard?”

Cloud spun to face Zack and pointed at his eyes. “I was kinda pickled. Besides, Director Tuesti and I knew each other before…”

Before the Time Travel.

“…before he became a Director.”

That was a lie Tseng could easily fabricate a story around, and at least Tseng looked approving of the fib. Given that Reeve was the designer of the more recent Reactors, it would be easy to fabricate that they had met in Nibelheim on an inspection or what not.

Given Tseng had spent the last twenty-ish minutes planning the best way to kill him, it was definitely an improvement.

“Well, let’s get out of here, yeah?” Cid grinned. “Get your Turk and your SOLDIER on here, too! The boss man called me shortly after I hung up with Reeve!”

Ah. That definitely referred to Rufus.

The four scrambled towards the Tiny Bronco. It didn’t look much better than it had in the future. Old. Run down. But still gearing to fly them out of this mess. He let everyone else get on first before bumping his fist with Cid’s.

“Good ta have you aboard,” Cid grinned as he lit a cigar. “Try not to cause too much trouble, ya hear.”

“You and I both know I can’t promise that,” Cloud huffed fondly back as he moved to his seat.

Shaking his head at Cid’s booming laugh, Cloud prepared to brace himself for the flight, only to find Cid offering him a bright red ribbon.

“Figured you’d want to replace your old one,” he grinned smugly, patting his own arm as Cloud accepted the ribbon.

“Yeah…”

Cloud stared down fondly at the ribbon before allowing Cid the honor of tying it to his bicep. Then, without a word, he braced himself for the flight ahead.

“Cloud,” Tseng addressed him quickly. “It might be best if we made a detour.”

“Huh? To where?”

Tseng pressed his lips together in a grim smile. “Icicle Inn.”

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There was a quaint little church in the Sector Five Slums.

There was a flower girl too.

“Hello!” she greeted, all bubbly and warm. “I’m Aerith! Your resident flower girl! I’ve been expecting you both to show up! Fraid mom says I can’t keep you at home, but I’ll have supplies for the two of you to stay here for a bit if you don’t mind.”

“You were… expecting us?” Angeal asked slowly, noting the food and other supplies already gathered beside an impressive flower bed.

“Yep! Cloud sent you, right?”

“Oh?” Genesis tilted his head like a cat who just saw something amusing. “How interesting. Our Dearest Gift of the Goddess seemed rather insistent that the two of you had never met.”

Aerith’s smile became something incredibly mischievous, or maybe

more amused. It was hard to tell. She was like a blessed ray of sunshine after a cloudy wet month. The bright, welcoming air of the church only added to the warmth that beckoned them inside.

“No. I’ve never met him,” Aerith confirmed. “But I do know *of* him. And I know he sent you to me. Now come on! Let’s get you both settled! Then we can talk about your condition, alright? I’ve got cakes!”

It was such a strange interaction, but so was their interaction with Cloud Strife.

With little left to lose, the two followed the Flower Girl further into the church, and hopefully took their next steps towards a cure.

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